Report of the Bluefin Tuna Species Working Group

Advisory Committee to the U.S. Section to ICCAT
Species Working Group Meeting
May 18, 2021

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The Bluefin Tuna Species Working Group met virtually on May 18, 2021 to develop recommendations regarding ICCAT's conservation, management, research, and data collection efforts for Atlantic bluefin tuna. The Working Group reviewed its 2020 report and considered the results of ICCAT's 2020 correspondence process and the recent work of ICCAT's Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS).

With very limited time for discussion, the Group did not reach consensus on a path forward for western bluefin following the 2021 assessment, especially recognizing that the measure will simply be a bridge toward adoption of a management procedure next year that will provide a basis for TAC-setting starting in 2023. Some individual members of the Group voiced support for one of the following approaches:

- The United States should propose a 1-year TAC that will have at least a 60% chance of preventing overfishing of western Atlantic bluefin tuna in 2022.
- The United States should advocate the short-term objective of maintaining the status quo until an MSE based MP is available. Doing so would mean making the minimum TAC changes necessary to maintain fishing mortality rate and biomass within their recent range (e.g., 10 years as a starting point for a discussion) based on the results of the most recent assessment information.

The Bluefin Tuna Species Working Group makes the following points and recommendations for the Advisory Committee's consideration:

Conservation and Management Recommendations

1. The United States should ramp up stakeholder outreach in order to increase basic understanding of the management strategy evaluation (MSE) process (i.e., "MSE 101"), as well as the timeline and workplan for the bluefin MSE, in particular. The outreach should focus on: a) providing a better understanding of tradeoffs and b) seeking stakeholder input on operational management objectives (i.e., further developing Res. 18-03). Outreach webinars should be organized via multiple fora, including the IAC, SMAST, and the SEFSC. Ideally, the bluefin-specific webinars would be scheduled after the July SCRS bluefin meeting when preliminary MSE results will be available. However, consideration must be given to the fact that it will be very difficult for fishermen to attend these meetings during the height of the fishing season. The objective should be to provide stakeholders with the needed background on MSE enabling them to effectively engage in advance of a stakeholder input meeting. This meeting needs to be scheduled sufficiently far in advance of November 12 in order to allow enough time for the outcomes from this meeting to be conveyed to our fishery managers at

NOAA. When discussing management objectives, associated candidate performance metrics should be chosen carefully in consultation with scientists, so they are robust in the face of decisions about the structure of operating models and weightings used in the MSE.

2. Noting concern about the lack of time allocated to the Fall 2021 Panel 2 meetings and need for managers, with engagement from stakeholders, to be prepared to actively contribute to the meetings and provide feedback to the SCRS, the United States should advocate for ICCAT to schedule a series of pre-meeting virtual regional workshops (e.g., North America, North Africa, Asia) with interpretation to allow more informal interactions and dialogue among scientists and managers. The United States should support development of communication materials and a streamlined format for presenting preliminary MSE results. The United States should support inclusion in the Panel 2 meeting agenda of a session including interaction with an online tool to explore tradeoffs among management objective performance, if recommended by the SCRS.

3. Taking into account mixing between the eastern and western stocks, the United States should fully support urgent adoption and implementation of those measures recommended by the Working Group on Bluefin Tuna Control and Traceability Measures that would strengthen monitoring, control, and surveillance of the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna fishery.

4. The United States should prioritize the development of ICCAT standards for electronic monitoring that are consistent with current U.S. requirements, as well as a workplan and timeline for implementation of a comprehensive electronic monitoring program, as a supplement to human observer programs.

Research and Data Collection Recommendations

1. NMFS scientists should continue to be active in the SCRS work to develop MSE for both bluefin tuna stocks, as the SCRS's present workplan envisions presenting MSE results to the Commission for consideration and adoption in 2022.

2. NMFS should continue its efforts to improve indices of abundance for western Atlantic bluefin tuna, considering environmental factors and input from fishermen. Efforts should include improved trip reporting, along with new aerial surveys targeting juveniles. Improvements would be beneficial to both the stock assessment and the MSE.

3. NMFS should continue work in cooperation with Canada and Japan on the close-kin genetic mark-recapture study (CKMR) of the western population, aiming to finalize its initial population estimate by 2021. NMFS should encourage and support similar work for the eastern population, if deemed feasible given the much larger population size. NMFS and SCRS should view CKMR as an additional source of stock assessment information, not as a competing assessment. This means that scientists should already be considering how results might be incorporated into the MSE process and management procedures, as was done with pioneering development of CKMR for Southern bluefin tuna.

4. NMFS should continue to support studies that address oceanographic linkages between habitat (including forage fish) and bluefin tuna availability (including juveniles) and larval population dynamics to improve information from survey and fishery CPUE indices. This should include continuing and expanded studies in the Gulf of Mexico, the Slope Sea, and other potential critical habitat areas for bluefin tuna.

5. The United States should examine the sampling structure, target sampling level, and associated sampling costs for otoliths and genetic data in the U.S., Canadian, and Japanese fisheries, advising on the geographic and temporal representativeness of collection to optimize sampling methods. The number of genetic samples necessary for CKMR (for varying degrees of population census accuracy) should be determined, taking into account the likely percentage of eastern origin fish that will be inadvertently sampled. Otolith sampling levels should be determined based on age structure and natal origin data needs. The United States should strive to develop a formal annual program funded by a direct budget line item (vs. the Bluefin Tuna Research Program, BTRP) for sampling U.S. bluefin tuna catch.

Bluefin Tuna Species Working Group Meeting Attendees:

IAC Members:

Jason Bahr
Rick Bellavance (New England Fishery Management Council)
Willy Goldsmith
Mike Pierdinock
David Schalit
Mike Sissenwine
Chris Weiner

Technical Advisors:
Steve Getto
Greg Mayer (absent)
George Purmont
Andrew Webber

Other Attendees:

Kim Blankenbeker
Craig Brown
John Walter
Matt Lauretta
Sarah McLaughlin
Randy Blankenship
Megan Walline
Deirdre Warner-Kramer

Commissioners:
Alexa Cole
Ray Bogan
Glenn Delaney